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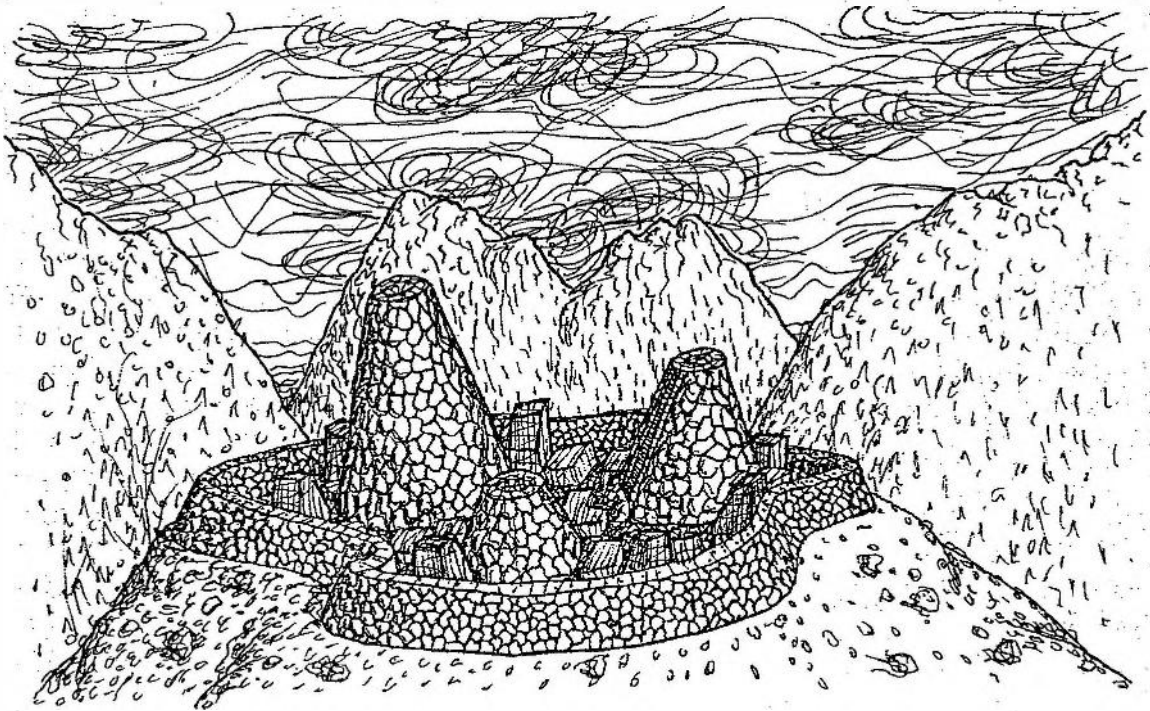
# The High Priest Of Turmiz

by

Lee Clark Zumpe

Deep in the Northern Mountains in the city called Turmiz, the altar upon which the necromancer Ak Khun Khan shed the blood of infants to appease the young and hungry gods still stands enshrouded by hoary shadows. Though few would venture into the subterranean corridors which lead to the Old One's sacred temple, the Priesthood maintains an access point through which pilgrims wishing to make an offering may pass. In those tunnels beneath that highland sanctuary, slinking through dismal and abandoned burrows, it is rumored that the raspy voice of the long-interred High Priest

echoes down the ages whispering invocations. Turmiz, the city purportedly built by dragonkind before men conquered these lands, is hard-featured and terrible to behold. Tall, black, windowless towers stab skyward ungraciously. The city walls are ominous and impenetrable, and the city itself seems to intimate that it is both as old and as undying as the mountains surrounding it. At first sight, it appears that the rock vomited up this geometric monstrosity and that men simply infest its honeycomb caverns.



The Scroll of Zahkmuur tells that Ak Khun Khan first stumbled upon this place in the Dark Ages before Amoroz disbanded the Sect of the Black Goat. In those ancient days, the gods still attended this divine highland, still walked upon the consecrated ground of the Plateau of Uddath Angk, and still delivered their word directly unto the apostles. There was no need for divination nor interpretation of omens, and never arose a distortion of the gods' will by ignorant and self-absorbed members of the Priesthood.

In the Year of the Blood Moon, Xamol first journeyed to Turmiz with a dozen and one black-hooded acolytes. The Great Reformer in his youth vowed to reveal the wicked underpinnings of our heritage and -- during the course of his career -- promised to purge the Priesthood of all the depraved perversions of the Scripture that harkened back to the days of Ak Khun Khan. Xamol the Purifier came to Turmiz a vigorous, strong-willed, fervent revolutionary, eager to challenge the arcane mystics who swore allegiance to the legacy of Old One.

The followers of Ak Khun Khan's disciplines entertained Xamol's party and attended his exhortation on the malignancy of derivative dogma. In their lavish shrine set deep in the very mountain they gave ear to the Great Reformer as he admonished the assembly of Turmiz for deifying the image of the Old One, for praising him in hymns and for making sacrifices in his name. Respectfully, they feasted with their presumptuous guests, shared ivory-yellow wine served in golden goblets, and even prayed together at the feet of the idol of Rahtu.

Yet, never once did the Priesthood of Turmiz yield to Xamol the Purifier's insistence that they renounce the name of Ak Khun Khan.

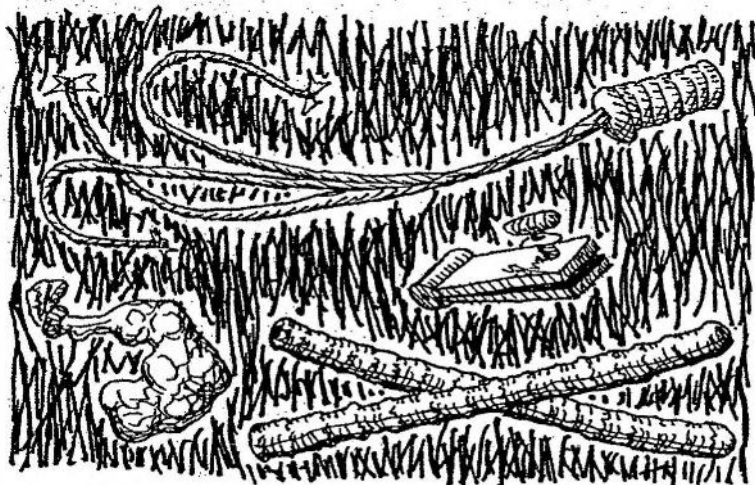
And so it was that Xamol, acting under the authority of the Yharim Dynasty and a vassal of emperor, dismissed the acting High Priest of Turmiz and detained other high-ranking adherents of the Old One's teachings. Soldiers stood guard outside temples to ensure that improper worship could not take place, and all known entrances to the network of tunnels beneath the city were either sealed or secured. Xamol even ordered the city guard to confiscate religious icons related to the worship of the Old One, and popular fetishes of Ak Khun Khan were collected from merchants and destroyed.

An inquisition convened, and Xamol selected a dozen and one errant priests to interview. These he assigned to his hooded acolytes with the instructions that all means be employed to secure from each an acknowledgment of iniquity and a detailed confession of the profane ceremonies relative to the blasphemous idolatry of Ak Khun Khan. The Great Reformer taught torture as a potent tool of persuasion, and his subordinates had grown adept in the unconventional techniques their master favored.

Appropriating the governor's palace, Xamol banished the nobles -- whose support of the zealots in Turmiz was well known -- to the streets. While outside a hoard of commoners gathered to protest the persecution, in darkened chambers within the palace the instruments of tortures were revealed one by one: Flesh-tearers, thumbscrews, shin-crushers, skull-crackers, three-thonged scourges, cudgels and cords all crept into the candlelight under the knowing hands of the ardent inquisitors. The mere sight of such atrocious contrivances had been known to break many a man's



resolution; but the followers of Ak Khun Khan were dedicated to their faith.



For days, the corridors of that place were flooded with the wailings of the accused, and by night their pitiful weeping spilled into the streets where their patrons huddled. Occasionally the assemblage vented shuddering groans in sympathy.

On the fifth day of torture, the hooded acolytes of Xamol came before him to report the last of the priests had died under the inquisition. Not one had conceded indiscretions, not one had confessed to abominations, and not one had declared the adoration of the Old One amounted to blasphemy. They stood silently, their faces obscured by their vestments, their expressions hidden from their master, as they awaited chastisement and direction.

Xamol, the Great Reformer, fumed. He considered apprehending another handful of priests, but suspected that torture would prove ineffective on them as well. To crop this putrescent branch of worship, Xamol realized he would have to venture into the

subterranean corridors and search out Ak Khun Khan's sacred temple deep in the heart of the mountain. Upon finding the repellent lair of the wretched Old One, he would oversee the destruction of all traces of this man's filthy existence.

Long after the black tide of night had browned the high country in darkness; after the angry masses of the peasantry had taken their leave of the streets outside the palace to hurry back to their cave-like dwellings in the ancient city, Xamol and his company retired from the halls of the governor's residence and sped to a secluded passage under strict guard. Past a dozen sacrificial stones they marched, glancing at dragontail wisps of incense dancing in the torchlight. Down, they sped, through cobweb-draped channels where shadow seemed to hold sway and the icy air bit at exposed flesh unceasingly. Beyond the cryptic pictographs of the prehistoric mountain clans they passed at length, and further still until the cave had dwindled into a narrow shaft and the floor threatened to meet the ceiling.

On his hands and knees Xamol pushed onward, certain his persistence would prove meritorious.

Then, finally, the constricted crawlway opened into a vast chamber. Xamol's torch burned a patch of comfortless illumination into the primeval gloom. Its flickering flames begot twisting shadows which alluded to faceless horrors just outside the circle of light. He froze at the sight before him. At the center of the room, the infamous altar stood waiting -- the Old One's own book of profane writings silently anticipating the rebirth of its application. A thousand dormant candles encircled the place, and as the Great Reformer moved forward, he wordlessly implored his followers to use their torches to light the candles.

He alone approached the altar. His fingers drifted hesitantly across the text for a moment, then he drew back fearfully as though touching the words might make him believe. Yet, once his gaze fell upon the lines he could not turn away; and as he read the ancient verses he could hear Ak Khun Khan's voice murmur in his head.

Finally, Xamol wrenched himself free from the accursed tome. The candles now burned brightly, and the extent of the chamber was revealed. In every corner there loomed the face of a dragon, gaping maws ringed by grisly fangs, hideous talons clenched, narrow eyes glaring mercilessly. The Great Reformer shivered at the fearsome renderings in stone, even though he knew them to be nothing more than sculptures.

These were Ak Khun Khan's gods -- the false gods of Turmiz. The Old One taught that men are little more than pawns to the descendants of the dragonkind, and that someday their kin would rise again from secreted caverns to lord it over the kingdoms forged by the lesser race. The Priesthood of Turmiz echoed his beliefs in their sermons; and the people of Turmiz had been corrupted by these lies.

No longer could such defilement of the truth be allowed. Xamol the Purifier would not permit it.

"Burn the book," the Great Reformer said, turning to his acolytes, "And return with hammers to deface these awful icons. Nevermore shall the people of Turmiz speak of the dragonkind!"

He awaited the execution of his orders, but found his subordinates unmoving. He repeated his mandate, shaking his fists and cursing the spirit of Ak Khun Khan with considerable passion. Still, the hooded acolytes stood motionless as though his words had not reached them.

Then, one by one, they drew back their hoods and revealed their faces. Xamol staggered backwards as he gazed upon the scaly green flesh of a dozen and one descendants of the dragonkind. His heart raced as their serpent-eyes regarded him angrily, and he whimpered as they encircled him. When their grisly fangs bore down on him, when their hideous talons raked his flesh, his scream echoed through the subterranean corridors and rang out through the streets.

And after a moment all was quiet again in the city called Turmiz.

